

null
Carol X Weakley 11/07/2006 02:13:13 PM From DB/Inbox: Carol X Weakley

Cable
Text:

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 04396

SIPDIS
CXTela:
ACTION: ECON
INFO: IPSC SCI IMO CONS RES POL DCM AMB AID ADM FCS
PD

DISSEMINATION: ECON
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: ECON:WWEINSTEIN
DRAFTED: ECON:AABELL
CLEARED: ECON:WWEINSTEIN, ECON:JWITOW, POL:PVROOMAN

VZCZCTVI151
OO RUEHC RUEHXX
DE RUEHTV #4396/01 3071646
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 031646Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7403
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 004396

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2016
TAGS: [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [EIND](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: EVANGELICAL FEAST SERVES UP MANNA FOR ISRAELI
TOURISM INDUSTRY

REF: TEL AVIV 3503

Classified By: Economic Counselor William Weinstein for reasons 1.4 (b,
d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The anemic Israeli tourism industry recently received an injection of USD 15-18 million from 5,000 Evangelical Christian pilgrims who attended a week-long Feast of Tabernacles celebration sponsored by the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem (ICEJ). In its 27th year, the convention brought pilgrims from 80 countries to celebrate the Israeli holiday of Sukkot and demonstrate support for the Jewish state. Tourism Minister Itzhak Herzog emphasized the significance of the celebration as a symbolic, as well as economic, turning point for the tourism industry's post-war recovery. During the convention, the director of the Israeli national Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, announced the establishment of a "Christian Desk," to be maintained by ICEJ, at the prestigious memorial. On the same evening, the pro-Zionist ICEJ also announced the successful relocation of the 100,000th immigrant from the former Soviet Union whose immigration ICEJ has facilitated. Regarding its relationship with Israel's 120,000 Christian Arab citizens, an ICEJ administrator explained that, "although the Christian Arabs are our brothers and sisters in Christ...they don't share our Biblical interpretation of the purpose of the land of Israel as God's inheritance for the Jewish people." End summary.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE AFTER A DIM SUMMER

¶2. (SBU) During the first six months of 2006, Israel was on pace to welcome a record 2.7 million tourists this year -- a figure that would have signalled a complete recovery of the tourism industry after a multi-year slump associated with the second Intifadah. Not surprisingly, the 34-day war with Hizballah during the peak summer tourism season dashed those hopes. Since July, foreign tourism to Israel has dropped 40 per cent below pre-war expectations for 2006 and 25 per cent below 2005, dealing a significant blow to the nearly three billion dollar-a-year industry. Current Tourism Ministry projections estimate the end-of-year total for 2006 will reach 1.6 million visitors, a level comparable to 2004.

¶3. (SBU) Billed by the Israeli Tourism Ministry as "the largest annual tourism event in Israel," the ICEJ's 27th annual Christian celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles brought 5,000 Christian pilgrims to Israel in October. Representing some 80 nationalities, these tourists booked 16,000 hotel room nights in the Jerusalem area and pumped an estimated 15-18 million dollars into the local economy. Speaking to journalists covering the first night of the convention, Tourism Minister Itzhak Herzog emphasized the significance of the influx as a symbolic, as well as economic turning point, saying, "This event is so important to us because it shows a lot of strength. It's a major recovery and taking into account (tourists) from 80 nations...(it's) absolutely incredible."

IDEOLOGY TRUMPS FEAR OF INSTABILITY

¶4. (SBU) Due to the recent war with Hizballah and continued political unrest in the occupied territories, expectations for this year's Feast attendance were low. Consequently, ICEJ administrators and GOI officials were surprised by the high turnout. According to ICEJ spokesman David Parsons, many pilgrims said they refused to cancel reservations despite concerns over their safety "because they are ideologically driven to stand with Israel."

GOI EMBRACES EVANGELICAL SUPPORT

¶5. (SBU) Several influential Israeli government officials addressed the week-long convention, including Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who delivered an effusive opening-night welcome via videotape. "We had the courage to face the adversaries of the State of Israel," Olmert asserted, "largely because we have friends like you." Tourism Minister Itzhak Herzog delivered the keynote address the following night to a capacity audience at the International Convention Center in Jerusalem. Econoff attended "Israeli Night," an Israeli-themed musical program with over 2500 Israeli guests, including some 200 Holocaust survivors, or family members of survivors. During the ceremony, Director of Yad Vashem (national Holocaust memorial) Avner Shalev announced the creation of a "Christian Desk" to be maintained by the ICEJ on the premises of the Yad Vashem memorial and museum in Jerusalem. Afterward, ICEJ Director Rev. Malcolm Hedding announced the arrival of the 100,000th immigrant from the former Soviet Union whose immigration to Israel the ICEJ has facilitated.

ICEJ'S ZIONIST IDEOLOGY AT ODDS WITH LOCAL CHRISTIAN ARABS

¶6. (C) At a reception following the evening's official ceremony, econoff met the sole American administrator on the ICEJ staff, Comptroller Tim King (please protect). When asked about ICEJ's relationship, if any, with Israel's 120,000 Christian Arab citizens, King replied that the purpose of the ICEJ's ministry was to demonstrate Christian love and support for the Jewish people after many years of Christian anti-Semitism. King said that while the ICEJ considers Israel's Christian Arabs to be "brothers and sisters in Christ...they don't share our Biblical

interpretation of the purpose of the land of Israel as God's inheritance for the Jewish people."

BUT NOT NECESSARILY WELCOME BY ALL JEWS

17. (C) Econoff observed that one Israeli attendee in his mid-30s was conspicuously attired as a haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jew. (Comment: The haredi communities live extremely insular lives, and many do not even recognize the authority of the State of Israel. Thus, the presence of a haredi at a Christian convention endorsed by the GOI seemed unusual. End comment.) When asked about the haredi in the audience, King replied that he did not know the man, but surmised that he was possibly a member of an underground ultra-Orthodox organization known as Yad L'Achim (Hand to the Brothers). He said that Yad L'Achim frequently monitors ICEJ activities and has, in the past, "caused problems" for ICEJ through its influence on the Jerusalem city council. King said that ICEJ is careful not to actively proselytize in Israel and thus become vulnerable to legal action.

COMMENT

18. (C) The GOI in general and Tourism Ministry in particular view the international Evangelical community as a largely untapped market of relatively wealthy consumers who meet Israel's stringent security requirements for entry. In May 2006, the Tourism Ministry placed a director for Evangelical marketing in Los Angeles, and a real estate contract to provide land for the construction of a Christian Heritage Park in the Galilee continues to work its way through the Israeli court system. End comment.

Visit Embassy Tel Aviv's Classified Website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/telaviv>

You can also access this site through the State Department's Classified SIPRNET website.

JONES